

**Interview with CDR Margaret Nash, NC, USN, World War II POW nurse, conducted in Walnut Creek, CA, by Andree Marechal-Workman, Public Affairs Officer, Naval Hospital, Oakland, CA, August 1992.
(1911-1992)**

Where were you from originally?

Edwardsville, PA, a small town near Wilkes-Barre, about 20 miles from Scranton. There were seven in the family--four girls and three boys. I was next to the youngest. The boys were older. I had a kid brother 10 years younger who died when he was 10. I was the youngest girl.

How did you join the Navy?

I was in Pennsylvania doing graduate work. There was a flood. It was in 1936, and I was working coast Guard cutters in the flood. My uncle who was a congressman, came up to survey the area. After the flood was over he asked me what I was going to do, and since I replied I had no idea, he asked me, "How would you like to go in the Navy?" I said sure I'd love it, but "don't tell my mother." And so on April 28, 1936 we travelled to Portsmouth, VA.

I was stationed there about 18 months. From there I went on to Newport RI, and was there for a little over a year. I then received my orders to go to Mare Island for temporary duty awaiting transportation to my next assignment which was Guam Naval Hospital.

At that time, you had no idea there was going to be a war?

I had no idea until I heard it over the loud speaker. That's how naive I was. I was having such a wonderful time that I didn't even think any tragedy like that could ever happen. So we stayed at Mare Island for 6 months. Then Eldene and I got our orders to Guam. On the way out, we ran into a typhoon, and when we arrived, it caught up with us and nearly blew us off the island.

That was my first disaster--the typhoon. Upon arriving we found everything just like glass. So my initiation there wasn't too good. But I grew up on Guam. It was a paradise when I was there, the paradise of the Pacific!

I met this naval officer, and Ed was the executive officer on the Penguin [AM-33], one that never left port; it never went any place. We went together for about 7 months and were engaged to be married. From then on our lives were just a ball. I worked on the OR all the time supervising. I loved the OR, I loved my staff, and it was just a happy place...and working with the Chamorrans, who are just wonderful, gentle people.

I was there until October 1941. I was in the OR when I had my first inkling that there was something wrong. We were doing a caesarean section when our chief nurse came in and aid, "You'd better let your senior nurse take over, your orders are in." I was shocked and I said, "Well, why don't we finish this operation?" She said "You don't have time, you have to be aboard in 2 hours. Maria is packing all your clothes and you and Maria are being transferred to Manila." We went down to board the ship and we were escorted. Everything was black, and all the way out we were under a blackout. This is when I thought there was something wrong. So I asked the chaplain and he said that we were traveling under secret orders. When we were supposed to dock in 10 days and were still out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, I asked the Chaplain what was going on. He said that we were still traveling under secret orders. We had a little orchestra aboard and they started playing "The monkeys have no tails on Mango Wango."

But after a few weeks we got to Manila and everyone asked where we had been because we were supposed to have gotten there a couple of weeks before.

I started getting used to the naval hospital [Canacao] and getting my assignments. I was at Manila when the Japanese attacked. In the meantime, Ed was coming out and we were going to get married in February. I was going to come back home, but he had to stay with the ship.

On Monday morning at 6 am, the loud speaker said "Hear this, Pearl Harbor was bombed." I said "Pearl Harbor, where is that?" Of course we all knew something about Hawaii. We had to report to the hospital immediately to start evacuating the patients. I knew then that we were really in for it.

The Canacao Naval Hospital was near the Cavite Navy Yard, about 5 kilometers from where we were stationed. Clark Field wasn't that far away either. We were right in the middle of a military target. That Monday we discharged the patients who could go back to duty. I think we had some polio patients who were in iron lungs. We left them at the hospital.

At noon on Tuesday the Japanese came over and started dropping their bombs. We were underneath our nurses quarters. That was on Tuesday. Their target that day was Clark Air Base, and they got all those pilots just as they were getting in their planes. They just mowed them down. So that's the first time we heard the bombs. Then the next day they bombed the Cavite Navy Yard. That was really our first experience with casualties. The gates at the yard were all locked and they couldn't get out. So those poor fellows were absolutely massacred in there. Our corpsmen went out in the ambulances and we stayed in the hospital with the casualties. Many of our corpsmen didn't come back. The casualties were coming in every vehicle available, some sitting on tops of cars and four and five in a car. They were even picking up the dead and bringing them in, not knowing whether people were living or dead. Our ward had 78. I know that when I walked in the hospital and looked at the ward I said, "Oh, my God, this is really war," and the rest of the girls felt the same way.

Our chief nurse [Laura Cobb], some of our senior nurses and five others were sent to Santa Scholastica, where we set up tents. The college was run by the Seventh Day Adventists and they were absolutely wonderful to us. I'll never forget them either. They helped us as much as they possibly could. We put the patients in the tents, set up the cots for ourselves. The mosquitoes and the ants were unbelievable. But one thing--our corpsmen. Leave it to the corpsmen. We didn't sleep all night and we looked as though we had the chicken pox from the bites. The corpsmen put vaseline strips around the legs of the cots and the ants couldn't crawl up. I can never say enough about those corpsmen.

We stayed there until December 26, 1941. We had a radio and Roosevelt gave a speech and said that Manila was going to be declared an open city. CAPT [Robert G.] Davis, the OIC, decided it was safer for us to go to Manila with the patients. So the next day we took off again, going over these ridges that were mined, and back into Santa Scholastica, where we'd started from. Just as we arrived in Manila, the Japanese came over again and started bombing. All we could do was take the patients in ambulances outside the fence.

We set up the hospital because we knew we were going to stay in there for a while. On January 2, the Japanese moved into the city in force. They came on every conveyance you could ever believe. But they didn't take prisoners, at least we didn't hear about any. Our chief nurse would tell us everything she heard. But what they did was put Japanese guards at the gate. And then on January 2 we were officially prisoners of war.

A lot of people don't know about Canacao and Cavite. And you don't get any stories about that. It upsets me a little bit because I know what our boys, our patients, went through. Our morgue was filled capacity out there.

Can you estimate how many people died?

Not really. But I would say thousands. And the Filipinos worked in the Navy Yard. To tell you the truth, it was hard to tell. [Talking about the Canacao Hospital] They were so severely injured. You only knew that it was a human being. And I remember one little boy saying one time when I passed his bed, "Could I have a glass of water?" and I said I'd bring it right back, and by the time I got back, he was dead. This is what war is all about, and that killed me. Dottie [Dorothy Still Danner] Still said that the same youngster had asked her for a glass of water. But we were three nurses on that ward taking care of all these patients who were sitting on chairs. There were four or five on the top of the beds, the abottom of the beds, in between the beds. And all these Filipino people were really suffering.

Our doctors were all in the OR, so we had to depend on ourselves. There were only nine Navy nurses because we had sent two to Sternberg Army Hospital the day before. the only thing we had was emergency care. Everyone was screaming in pain. The first thing we would do was to fill up a syringe (Nobody was giving us orders, we were doing it all on our own) with 20 cc of morphine. One girl would fill a 20 cc with tetanus toxoid, and she'd go first and give the tetanus toxoid. And then the nest nurse would follow her and give each one the morphine to try and ease some of the suffering. And that went on the entire day.

The next time I looked out the window it was dark, and there was fire all around us. And I thought to myself, "If they came and drop another load of bombs, this suffering would all be over."

I went up to the OR several times, as I had always been an OR nurse, and we were operating on one patient after another. We would assign the ones whom we thought needed surgery. Everyone was just walking from one patient to the other without changing gloves or anything. All we were doing was saving lives. The doctors were operating on the steps, any place at all available. They were doing the same thing we were, doing emergency care.

We set up the hospital at Santa Scholastica. We had three big wards. We continued on there until about March 15. By that time, many of the patients had died. Many were also recovering. We began transferring them to Bilibid prison camp [Manila]. But we stayed at Santa Scholastica until about March 15 [1942]. Then the Japanese commandant said--and I'll never forget it--he told us that they were transferring us to a civilian internment camp--Santo Tomas. We didn't know what was ahead.

Do remember your state of mind when you realized you were POWs?

None of our girls ever complained. We did what was expected of us, and that was to care for patients. The chief petty officer and the other [corpsmen] were trying to hide the drugs we had, the ones the Japanese were trying to confiscate. And while they were doing that, we took care of the patients.

Two of our ward of 78 patients escaped. They were a couple of Filipino patients. When the Japanese came in and counted the patients, they saw that two were gone. They said they were going to shoot the nurse who was on the ward, the corpsman, and also the doctor in charge. I remember telling our chief nurse Laura Cobb, "My goodness, they're going to shoot CAPT

Davis and my corpsman because those Filipino people escaped." About a week later she told me that I was to be included in that line up, but she hadn't thought it was the time to tell me.

As the patients began going to Bilibid and the other camps, we were never able to get any of them back to the States. we always said that the last ship went without us.

Our doctors were all in the OR, so we had to depend on ourselves. There were only nine Navy nurses because we had sent two to Sternberg Army Hospital evacuated the day before. The only thing we had was emergency care. Everybody was screaming with pain. The first thing we'd do was fill up a syringe (nobody was giving us orders, we were doing this all on our own) with 20 cc of morphine. One girl would fill a 20 cc with tetanus toxoid and go first and give the tetanus toxoid. Then the next nurse would follow her and give each one the morphine to try and ease some of the suffering that was going on. And that went on the entire day.

The next time I looked out the window it was dark and there was fire all around us. And I thought to myself, "if they come and drop another load, this suffering would all be over.

I went up to the OR several times as I had always been an OR nurse. We were operating on one patient after another. The doctors were just walking from one patient to the other without changing gloves or anything. All we were doing was saving lives, and they were operating on the steps, any place at all available. They were doing almost the same thing we were--going around and doing emergency care until we could get some place where we could get better care for them.

The Japanese didn't get there until January 1942. We set up dispensaries all over Manila. I was assigned to Santa Scholastica. It was a college of music run by the German fathers because, by that time, the hospital [Canacao] had been destroyed.

The Japanese continued to bomb us. They came every day at noon. In the meantime, we moved out to Philippine Union College, a small group of our patients plus....It was about March 15. We transferred to Santo Tomas. It was a Dominican college. I remember the first night. Of course, everyone kept looking at us there. There were only 11 of us. There were thousands of civilians who were put in there and those poor things hadn't time to adjust to anything like that in such a short time. I remember the first night we were there. They had no place for us to sleep. We slept on the floor in one of the halls. The next day they opened up a great big room that held 60 people. they decided that the Navy nurses would all be together. They set up cots right along the window.

But you were in a civilian hospital. Did they treat you like civilians?

No. We were military. Our chief nurse [] was with us. We took all the orders that we would as though we were in a Navy hospital. By this time, all the civilians in the camp knew it, and they had already set up a hospital in a machine shop behind Santo Tomas.

We offered our services which were greatly needed because they had only a few civilian nurses and people in the camp donated their time. So we went to work in the machine shop.

One morning, not quite a year after we came there, a Japanese guard began following me all the time. The moment I came out of the building, he was right there. When I'd get to the hospital, I'd turn around and he'd be following me. I was scared to death. When I would come out of the hospital in the afternoon when my shift was over, that same guard was there. Finally I told Father Dougherty about it and he said that he would follow him.

This went on for about 5 days. One day I was on the ward and Gladys told me about a patient with abdominal pain. In the meantime, she glanced over and said there was a guard at the door. It was the same fellow. And all of a sudden he snapped a picture. That's all he

wanted: to take a picture, and he had me in a panic for days. the next day my picture appeared in the Japanese propaganda machine and I was furious but there was nothing I could do about it.

After Corregidor fell, the Japanese transferred all the Army nurses to Santo Tomas. So by then we had a larger staff with our civilian nurses and ourselves. They were there for about a month or 6 weeks, something like that. Then we all went to work in Santa Catalina. That was a big building. There were about 60 patients in the wards.

Who were you treating?

We were treating the civilians of every country imaginable. There also people who had been enroute from such places as Singapore, Shanghai. They were all stranded. One of the nurses who joined us was a superintendent of Queen Mary Hospital in Hong Kong. There also was a Filipino nurse who was married to one of our officers.

Everything started to get down to a routine. We had three shifts and we carried on like we were in a hospital. It went on like that until May 1943.

The Japanese decided to open up another camp--Los Banos. It had been an agriculture college. The Japanese had planned on eventually transferring all the internees from Santo Tomas and moving them to Los Banos. They asked for volunteers. Dr. [] Leach, from the Rockefeller Foundation, said he would like to take the Navy nurses if they would go.

And so Laura Cobb, our chief nurse, who always consulted us about everything, asked us if we would like to go and we said that we would.

About that time they wanted volunteers to Holy Ghost Hospital where women and children were. I volunteered to go. I'd go any place to get outside that gate and look for an icecream cone. Mary Chapman and I volunteered to go and we were over there for 10 days. It was not only the children who were sick, but also the mothers. Mary and I ended up doing 12-hour shifts doing the cooking and feeding of all those babies and taking care of the mothers. After 10 days our passes were up and we had to come back. We were taking two little girls with us, I think they were about 12 years old. I said, "Mary, let's go down to the Escolata (a main street) and get an ice cream cone." She said, "we wouldn't dare." And I said, "They like children and the children want an ice cream cone."

So we went down the Escolata, and even the fellow in the car driving us from transportation was a little doubtful. But we went into this place anyway and were surrounded by Japanese who kept looking at us. We kept hanging on to the kids. We felt they wouldn't shoot us because they wouldn't shoot the Children. They bliked children. But then I got weak feet and said, "Mary, let's get out of here." So we got back into the car and I said "Santo Tomas," and I was never so happy to get behind some doors in all my life. And that was the last time I volunteered to go out.

In May 1943 we went to Los Banos to set up the camp there. They sent 800 able-bodied men, no women, and us 11 Navy nurses. They put us on a truck at 5 a.m. and gave us a duck egg and a piece of bread. By this time, the other internees had gotten to know us. They had a little band and they were playing "Anchors Away." And we were all crying as we went out.

The only thing I saw were boxcars when we got out. And I thought, "Surely, they're not going to put us in a boxcar." I knew it was a 5 or 6-hour trip. But sure enough they put us in a box car--68 men and two nurses to each car.

In general, how did the Japanese treat the nurses? Were they nice to you?

I think they had respect for us because we were working all the time. You never really knew how the Japanese felt. If you violated their regulations, they would shoot you. So you had to be very very careful.

CAPT Davis (the OIC), who was going with us advised us not to get friendly with too many of the civilians in the camp because we wouldn't really know who we were talking to. He said that there might be people in the camp who were trying to get information. We should be careful and be on our guard all the time. And so many people thought we must have been snobs but they admired us at the same time because we were always working.

If there was a mother and father in there, they weren't allowed to sleep together because babies weren't allowed in the camp. One night I was on night duty and one of our civilian guards said that a woman was about to deliver a baby and I said, "It's forbidden, she can't." He replied, "Well, I don't know what we're going to do, but there's a baby coming." I said to Dotty [Dorothy Still] who was with me that we would take turns. Dotty was sleeping. I went in and awakened her and said, "Dotty, I have to go downstairs, there's a baby being born." I remember her saying, "It's not allowed."

I came back at 5 a.m. and she was still in bed. I said, "Dotty, did you run a check on the patient?"

She said, "I had the funniest dream. I dreamt that you said to me that there's a baby being born, and you were going downstairs."

I replied that there was a baby born and we delivered it and wrapped it up and gave it to one of the civilian guards who took it back to the children's hospital.

Were you ever beaten, starved or maltreated?

They did terrible things in that camp. If anyone escaped they would try and make a spectacle of it and bring the back escapee into the camp. And they would beat them unmercifully and we all had to watch. And then, after the beating they would shoot them. It was things like that. What they were trying to get across to us was "don't try to escape because this is what's going to happen to you." Thank God we didn't have to attend too many of these spectacles.

It was a 5-hour trip from Santo Tomas to Los Banos. When we'd get to a station they would maybe open the door a little bit because everybody was just dropping from the heat. I'll never forget the Filipino people; they were wonderful. They would try to throw some food in, but the guards just wouldn't let them. The only thing we had to eat was the duck egg, and I kept wondering if it was boiled. One of the men cracked it and his was hard boiled, so we all ate the duck egg and a piece of bread. When we got to Los Banos about 5 hours later, there was nothing in that camp. We had no food. When they evacuated they took everything with them. We really had to start from scratch with the 800 men and 11 Navy nurses.

We had people in there of different professions--pharmacists, lab technicians--and we had a doctor, Dr. ____? Nance. He was a missionary who was caught in Manila. We also had a Hungarian doctor who had escaped from Hungary, came to the Philippines and got caught there. We were thankful for every able-bodied man and woman we could get hold of.

So we set up the hospital there and it was day after day the same routine: jungle rot, funguses, diarrhea, malnutrition, just everything.

What was a typical day, if there was such a thing?

To have 15 men in my dispensary soaking their feet in whatever--bichloride of mercury--whatever we had. If we ran out of one thing, I would tell the pharmacist to make up some other kind of solution. I remember one day, one of them said to me, "I have had this for 10 years and I went to the Rockefeller foundation and could never get rid of it." I looked at his problem and said, "Dear God, I hope you don't think you're going to get rid of it in here where we don't have anything."

And there was the fungus...look at my nails. My nails keep breaking up continuously. It was a fungus infection that they had in the Philippines. It's been 50 years and my nails are still breaking and discolored.

We did operations. In fact, we even had a Japanese guard who had his appendix out. And they stood over me watching all the time. If he had died, they would have shot one of us.

What did you get to eat?

Our menu was interesting. did you ever taste wall paper paste? Well, that's what we had for breakfast every morning. It was called lugao and they would give us milk to put on that. It would have weavels in it. If you were lucky enough, you would get a banana. And that was our breakfast. There were two meals a day, and that was in the morning. In the evening at 5 p.m. we got stew of all native vegetables. It was whatever grew out there. There was no meat, no protein. that's why we got so much beriberi and starvation.

I remember one time we saw a chicken on the other side of the barbed wire fence at Los Banos the night we were brought in. We hadn't had anything to eat beside that duck egg and a piece of bread and that was long gone. So we just watched the guard and one girl would get to the barbed wire fence. I don't know how Pagie [Eldene Paige] ever got that chicken, but we killed it and the men found something we could cook it in. I'll tell you, we had a great big pot of broth and with just this one chicken. We would look outside and see the monkeys in the banana trees. We were surrounded by banana trees, and those little animals would run and peel a banana, and we would just look at them. we were really starved. And that was our diet all the time we were at Los Baños. We were there from May 15, 1943 until February 23, 1945 at 7 a.m. Then some angels dropped from heaven in the shape of paratroopers; by that time, people were dying. We had 2500 internees in Los Banos at that time.

So, from 800 men and 11 nurses, the number had grown to 2500?

After we started building the camp up, the Japanese began transferring people from Santo Tomas, and by the time we were rescued, there were between 2300 and 2500. How many died, I'll never know because two or three were dying every day. It happened there right in the camp. One would say to the other "If you think you're going to die you had better start digging your grave because I'm just too weak."

What was the one particular moment you recall above all the others from 1941-45?

I will always remember the day of the rescue. We were all getting weaker and weaker. I was getting to the point that I would look at a pair of steps and think that I just couldn't walk up and neither could the rest of us. We all knew that we just couldn't go on much longer without the proper food.

Before the morning of the rescue--February 23-- planes were flying over us, American planes. The Japanese shot at them and some were shot down. We knew the Americans were close, on Leyte.

On the morning of the rescue, I came out at 7 a.m. I heard a plane go overhead. we had to go through roll call. I could walk up the hill, but I couldn't walk steps. So I went out and looked up and saw leaflets falling. I thought they were leaflets, but they were paratroopers. And when they dropped into the camp, the amphibious tanks crashed through the gate and the firing stopped. "Dear God," I thought, "today we either live or die, but at least this suffering is going to be over."

The first thing I did when the first paratrooper touched down was to run to him and ask if he had any food. He took out a Hershey bar and gave me half of it. I put it in my pocket. We had two newborn babies. Elizabeth was born on St. Valentine's Day and Anne, who was only 3 days old. We grabbed the patients and stuffed them under the beds to protect them from flying bullets. I took Elizabeth and Dottie [Dorothy Still] took the other baby. The paratrooper told us we had to leave immediately. I thought "here we've been all these years waiting for you fellows and now you tell us we have to leave right now." I said that we had sick patients and he told us that we had to get back to Leyte because the Japanese were surrounding us.

The tanks came through, the paratroopers kept dropping. Everything was happening all at once. Because the Japanese always did their calisthenics at 0700, the whole group was captured. Then the whole camp seemed to be on fire. I looked around and saw those flames, and I didn't care. I think we all felt the same way. There were stray bullets going in every direction and the first thing I thought about was our patients.

I took Elizabeth and her mother. By that time, things were beginning to slow down a bit. The troops said they were running out of ammunition and would have to reload. But we had to make it to the beach which was about a mile and a half away. They put Elizabeth and her mother on a stretcher. In fact, they took the mothers and the two babies and me aboard one of the amtracs. We were lucky because we got to ride to the beach. The rest all had to walk. We got down to the beach and I turned around and saw all our poor girls walking, dragging big_____, wishing there had been enough tanks. Everyone made it to the beach. There wasn't any more shooting. The Filipino guerrillas were protecting us.

I had a great bit hat and a can of sugar for the baby. I kept that can of sugar throughout the years. I just lay on the sand and covered the baby. The beach was Laguna de Bay, on the island of Luzon.

When did your folks learn that you were still alive?

I had a good friend, a CDR Armchet who was on Guam. He was in intelligence. Do you remember the photo that Japanese guard took of me? Well somehow he saw it and said, "That's Peggy Nash, I knew her in Guam and she was skinny then and she's skinny now." Anyway, that's how my family discovered I was alive. I've heard other versions, that someone found the picture on a dead Japanese soldier, but I believe the Army's version. They sent it back to the Navy Department and they contacted my mother. My father died when I was just a teenager. And so my poor mother...it got to the point that she had the telephone taken out of the house so she didn't have to keep hearing, "Peggy's never going to come back." Well my mother would say, "She's a fighter, she'll be back all right."